

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT GOES BACK TO THE FUTURE

Emergency managers who recall the civil defense era of the 1950's and responded to many of the nation's largest disasters over the past 30 years feel a bit like they're going "back to the future." The current debate on the future of emergency management that is occurring in the halls of Congress is more like a trip to the past and a rehash of issues that emergency managers have been struggling with for decades - without political support.

Every decade or so the nation experiences a large scale disaster that causes us to reevaluate how prepared we really are to handle catastrophic events like hurricanes, earthquakes and acts of terrorism. Hurricane Katrina, which hit the states of Louisiana and Mississippi as a category 4 hurricane is the largest disaster in U.S. history and the current catalyst for review of the nation's ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from major disasters. Preliminary after action reviews of the local/state/federal response to Hurricane Katrina have identified challenges in the areas of mass evacuation and population sheltering, command and control, logistics and resource distribution, intergovernmental coordination and interoperable communications. None of these are new issues and no one should be surprised at the nation's inability to respond to a catastrophic event like Hurricane Katrina. Why? Because as a society we have not made the necessary investment to build and sustain an effective national emergency management system that integrates local, state and federal resources and capabilities.

Now the United States is bracing for the very real possibility of an Avian or Pandemic Flu outbreak. The issues of quarantine, medical surge capacity, receiving and distribution of pharmaceuticals, crisis communications, continuity of government and other emergency response challenges loom large for state and local governments. What will it take for us to fix the problems of the past in order to ensure the future?

Lessons Not Learned from Hurricane Andrew

In 1993, following Hurricane Andrew which devastated south Florida and severely impacted southwestern Louisiana, the National Academy for Public Administration issued a congressionally requested report titled *Coping With Catastrophe, Building an Emergency Management System to Meet People's Needs in Natural and Manmade Disasters*. This report was a review and analysis of the entire structure of the disaster response system at all levels of government. If one were to go through the report and insert the hurricane named "Katrina" for "Hurricane Andrew" it would appear to have been published in 2005 instead of 1993. The issues, challenges, and recommendations for improvement to disaster response are the same today as they were more than a decade ago. The nation has failed to learn the lessons of the past.

The NAPA report addressed the issues of the role of the military and the federal government as first responder; state and local government organizational capability and coordination with the federal government; the role of Congress; and support for FEMA. Here are some excerpts from the report that remain relevant today.

Role of the Military and the Federal Government as First Responder

Following the response to Hurricane Katrina, President George W. Bush has proposed an increased role for the active military in response to catastrophic disasters. This same issue was raised following Hurricane Andrew and the NAPA panel did not recommend that the active military play a greater role in disaster response. They did say the problem should be addressed by improving procedures that allow civilian authorities to request assistance and support from

the military in a timely and efficient manner in those rare circumstances that require response capabilities of a magnitude only they can provide.

The NAPA panel also stated that the federal government cannot become the nation's "911" first responder. While the federal role in disaster response and recovery has increased over the years and public expectations have also grown, there are tens of thousands of emergencies and disasters each year that are handled by local and state governments. Disaster response is a layered system with local government as the first responder. When local resources and capabilities are overwhelmed the state becomes the second responder. The federal government should be the third responder. Strengthening local and state capabilities is the best way to address this federalism issue.

In an editorial published in the Washington Post on October 3, 2005 Florida Governor Jeb Bush advocated for the current system of disaster response by stating "just as all politics are local, so are all disasters. The most effective response is one that starts at the local level and grows with the support of surrounding communities, the state and then the federal government. The bottom-up approach yields the best and quickest results – saving lives, protecting property and getting life back to normal as soon as possible." Governor Bush went on to say that "when local and state governments understand and follow emergency plans appropriately, less taxpayer money is needed from the federal government for relief."¹

There is no question that the current emergency management system is not adequate. The fact remains that emergency management is primarily a state and local responsibility. Federal emergency management must be designed and enabled to support and coordinate effectively with state and local government. While federal emergency management is not doing support and coordination adequately now and must be fixed, it does not take away critical policy and resource gaps that are most appropriately filled at the state and local level.

Congress' Role and Responsibility

The 1993 NAPA report stated that "FEMA has been ill-served by congressional and White House neglect, irregular funding, and the uneven quality of its political executives..."²

The report recommended a reduction in the number of political appointees within FEMA to two – the director and deputy director.

The report called for the FEMA Director to have access to, and support of, the President of the United States as well as the development of structure and management systems to allow the agency leadership the means to direct the agency and coordinate (and thus lead) other federal agencies in effective disaster response.

¹Washington Post Editorial Column, October 3, 2005.

²National Academy of Public Administration, Coping With Catastrophe, Building an Emergency Management System to Meet People's Needs in Natural and Manmade Disasters. February 1993. p.ix.

The NAPA panel stated its belief that “Congress’ attention ought to shift from a preoccupation with shortcomings in the federal response, to support for improved management of FEMA and for the development of a national emergency management system based on intergovernmental coordination.”³

This statement rings true today as all levels of government face public health preparedness challenges for Avian or Pandemic Flu. Intergovernmental coordination will be crucial as local, state and federal health agencies take the lead in any designated public health emergency with coordination and support provided by emergency management, law enforcement and other emergency support functions. We must move forward with integrated planning, training and exercise if government is to effectively respond to Avian or Pandemic Flu. The nation cannot withstand another failed response.

Florida Governor’s Disaster Planning and Response Review Committee

The state of Florida conducted its own review of the response to Hurricane Andrew by convening the “Governor’s Disaster Planning and Response Review Committee” to provide recommendations for improving Florida’s readiness for disaster response. The committee issued its report in 1993 which included four key solutions to be implemented:

1. Improve communications at, and among, all levels of government;
2. Strengthen plans for evacuation, shelter, and post-disaster response and recovery.
3. Enhance intergovernmental coordination; and
4. Improve training.⁴

A Call to Action: Stop the Cycle of Destruction

Citizens and disaster victims should not be doomed to suffering the mistakes of the past and continued cycles of destruction because of the lack of political will to build and sustain an effective national emergency management system. We call upon the Administration, the Office of Management and Budget, Congress, governors, state legislators, mayors and all public officials to commit to fixing the problems of the past – once and for all.

³National Academy of Public Administration, Coping With Catastrophe, Building an Emergency Management System to Meet People’s Needs in Natural and Manmade Disasters. February 1993. p.xii.

⁴Governor’s Disaster Planning and Response Review Committee, Final Report, January 15, 1993, p.3.

Recommendations for an Effective National Emergency Management System

The following list of recommendations was compiled by a group of emergency management professionals with experience ranging from 17 to 53 years in the profession. They were involved in the response to many of the nation's largest disasters such as Hurricane Hugo, Hurricane Andrew, the 1993 Midwest Floods, the Loma Prieta and Northridge Earthquakes, the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and the Pentagon. Everything that is needed to fix the nation's emergency response challenges is known to us today, and has been known for more than a decade.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's focus on Hurricane Katrina has diverted attention from its mission to prevent terrorism. Likewise, the preoccupation with terrorism since September 11, 2001 may have led to the downgraded capabilities of FEMA that were so evident in response to Hurricane Katrina. There must be a balance struck between terrorism and natural disaster preparedness. It's not an either or proposition – we must do both. The following actions will help to achieve the overall mission of DHS.

The Need for Effective Emergency Management

Emergency management is the discipline and the profession of applying science, technology, planning, and management to deal with extreme events that can injure or kill large numbers of people, do extensive damage to property and disrupt community life. As a process it involves preparing, mitigating, responding and recovering from an emergency. Critical functional components include planning, training, simulating drills (exercises), and coordinating activities.

In 2005 alone, 43 major disaster declarations were declared in 32 states for events that included hurricanes, a typhoon and a cyclone, floods, landslides, and severe winter storms. A total of 68 federal emergency declarations were made along with 29 fire management assistance declarations. The largest disaster in U.S. History – Hurricane Katrina – devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005. The need for a national emergency management system that effectively integrates local, state and federal capabilities and resources has never been greater. Without question Hurricane Katrina revealed the weaknesses in our current system. The question remains whether we will learn from our failures and shortcomings and take advantage of this opportunity to rebuild and then sustain an effective national emergency management system.

Priority Recommendations for Congress

1. The role of the military should continue to be in support of civilian authorities. Procedures should be refined for requesting assistance from the Department of Defense (DoD) in those rare and catastrophic events when assets are needed that only DoD can provide.
2. Congress should require that criteria be developed for the FEMA Director position to ensure competent leadership and provide for a direct reporting relationship with the President. Congress should allow stakeholders to have a say in the vetting process for nominees. Reduce the number of political appointments within FEMA and fill positions of authority with individuals who have requisite experience.
3. FEMA must be fully staffed and have the capability to establish and maintain stockpiles and pre-position resources and equipment, as well as establish trained cadres of personnel to provide surge capacity in large disasters.
4. The fix to the nation's emergency response challenges is not exclusively a FEMA/federal issue. The capabilities of local and state emergency management and their emergency support functions must be strengthened. Emergency operations centers at all levels of government must be adequate to the task and responsibility and they are not at this point in time.
5. Congress should support the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) as an effective tool to reduce the loss caused by future disasters.

Priority Recommendations for the Department of Homeland Security

1. The nation's approach to preparedness must be multi-hazard to reflect all threats and risks, natural and man-made and technological alike, including acts of terrorism.
2. Integrated planning, training and exercise are a requirement for effective disaster response. Preparedness cannot be a separate function from disaster readiness, response and recovery.
3. Unity of effort is a pre-requisite for effective disaster response. Relationships must be established and communications networks in place prior to events. The Department of Homeland Security should establish a field presence that interacts with state partners on a day-to-day basis.
4. A federal/state/local working group of experienced professionals should be convened to review the National Response Plan and make adjustments based on lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina.
5. The Robert T. Stafford Act exists to enable assistance to state and local governments. Bureaucratic wrangling by federal lawyers gets in the way of disaster response. The public expects full and immediate implementation of authorities under the Stafford Act. Officials with these authorities should be empowered to act.

Priority Recommendations for the Federal Emergency Management Agency

1. The federal government is not nor should it be the nation's 9-1-1 for disaster response. Local government has primarily responsibility for initial disaster response and when their resources are overwhelmed the state becomes the second line of response. FEMA and the federal government is the third responder.
2. FEMA and emergency management must provide additional focus on its ability to effectively implement recovery programs for local governments, individuals, families, and businesses.
3. Debris removal continues to be one of the most challenging recovery issues for state and local governments and must be addressed.
4. There should be a trained cadre of emergency management reservists, following a military model, to assist states and/or the federal government in response to large scale disasters.
5. There is a lack of institutional knowledge for emergency management. The culture, policy and doctrine of previous eras have been lost and public officials have no roadmap to follow. Leadership and professional development curricula are needed for state and local officials, as well as those at the federal level with responsibilities for disaster preparedness, response and recovery. The development of future leaders is of paramount importance to professional, highly credible emergency management organizations.

Priority Recommendations for State and Local Governments

1. State and local governments should be held accountable against nationally established and agreed upon emergency management standards. The Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) was developed by and for state and local emergency management agencies and will continue to evolve to help programs meet the challenges of the future.
2. Criteria and standards should be established for emergency management professionals at each level of government.
3. Appointed and elected officials should be required to understand and exercise (drill) their emergency authorities and responsibilities in conjunction with emergency management officials. NIMS cannot function effectively if public officials don't understand how the system is intended to work in a real event.
4. All levels of government must focus on enhanced public information, crisis communications, and warning to include corresponding actions by the public.
5. Statutory incentives and regulations should be implemented that do not reward local and state governments or insurance organizations for poor public policy choices that result in

inappropriate land use planning and preparedness, ineffective building code requirements, and insufficient enforcement.

Priority Recommendations for Citizens

1. The media and the general public must understand that the federal government is not a first responder. Individuals, families and business have preparedness responsibilities to be self-sufficient for up to 72 hours following a disaster.
2. The nation must do a better job of integrating private sector resources during disaster response.

About NEMA

This document is endorsed by the Board of Directors of the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA). NEMA is the association of professionals dedicated to enhancing public safety by improving the nation's ability to mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from all emergencies, disasters, and threats to our homeland.

NEMA's mission is to:

- Provide national leadership and expertise in comprehensive emergency management.
- Serve as a vital emergency management information and assistance resource.
- Advance continuous improvement in emergency management through strategic partnerships, innovative programs, and collaborative policy positions.

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